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ABSTRACT

Remarks of Alaska Native researcher and educator Paul Ongtooguk are presented. Alaska Native students perform worse on exit exams than any other population in the state. In the past, formal education was offered to Alaska Natives only if they gave up being Alaska Natives. The current system is not designed to solve the problems of Alaska Native education. The missions of the University of Alaska are to provide winning teams for alumni, pursue research and funding for employees, and develop new buildings. In rural schools, superintendents and principals come in for a few years, eager to fill their resumes and ensure that the basketball teams are winning, then move on. School board members vote for inappropriate or unintelligible policies because they are tied to funding. In pushing skill-and-drill just to pass the exam, schools are missing the fact that for many kids, learning the skill isn't the hard part. Figuring out why they should bother is the real issue. When schools build students' history, traditions, communities, and challenges into the curriculum, students are given a reason to learn. Alaska Natives themselves are going to have to take the lead in making changes. The successes with Native corporations and the Native health care system are proof that change is possible. (TD)

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Paul Ongtooguk Address

to

Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Regional Summit on Native Education

April 24, 2002

Bethel, Alaska

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PAUL ONGTOOGUK ADDRESS TO YUKON-KUSKOKWIM DELTA REGIONAL SUMMIT ON NATIVE EDUCATION

April 24, 2002 - Bethel, Alaska

I don't know about you, but I'm still thinking about what Byron said. It's overwhelming. We have important work to do. All I can offer are some perspectives, from odds and ends. Let me see if I can expand on the challenges Byron has so clearly laid out for us.

We have some pretty remarkable successes that are occurring among Alaska Native students in the education system. We have a substantial and increasing population of second-generation, college-educated Native students. That's remarkable! We are actually seeing a current generation of Alaska Native college students whose own parents are college graduates as well. This is good news.

Regarding the recently adopted standards testing, some of the students who are doing well are Alaska Natives; and they are performing at as high a level as any population of students in the state. And that is good news.

We also see Native students who are doing excellent work in graduate school.

We have remarkable stories of Native students who are doing very good academic work in the face of tough personal circumstances. For all of the effort they are making, in response to educators and community members who promote Alaska Native education, we simply have to acknowledge that good things are happening.

But that's not the entire story. The fact that we must be concerned about is that - as a population - as a whole group - Alaska Native students are doing worse on the exit exams than any other population in the state. We are at the bottom.

As an educator, as an Alaska Native, I look at that number, and I have to admit that we have failed a large population of our students; and we are continuing to fail them today. After all, they aren't failing the exams all by themselves. We have failed to prepare them to fulfill a relatively simple set of skills and expectations. Moreover, if all of our students did well on the exit exams, that alone would not be something in which to take great pride. Essentially, we are talking about students who are achieving an eighth-grade education by the end of the twelfth grade. But, if we don't do at least that, we are in even deeper trouble.

Look at the number of Alaska Native students who are graduating from rural high schools, in comparison with those in urban high schools. Everyone seems to think that it is better in the cities. But it turns out that, as a population, Native students in urban high schools such as Anchorage and Fairbanks are in the lowest categories of success. They are doing worse than any other population. It is very difficult for us to face these facts. One part of me wants to get defensive and to say: "Wait a minute. Those are not my children; they're not my students." But we must look this straight in the face and ask: "What is going to happen about all of this? What are we going to do? Here's what I suggest that we not do. We must not continue to do what we have been doing for the

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past 30 years in Alaska Native education. Let's just shelve this 30-year run and admit to ourselves that the evidence is in - and that we've got to do it dramatically differently and dramatically better than we have done for the past three decades.

It actually goes much deeper. If we look closely at the history of Alaska Native education, we see that it has been a poisonous dinner served up to us in our own communities. The poisonous food was the promise of western schooling at the price of cultural genocide. The offer was this: "We will provide Alaska Natives with formal education if they give up..." - that is, if we give up - "...being Alaska Natives." And that was explicit. It was part of an expressed policy of the United States government - the Bureau of Indian Affairs - and of the State of Alaska, once it started to provide schooling to Native children, to educate the "Native" out of Alaska Natives. The model of the first boarding school, the Carlisle Indian School - for those who love the idea of boarding schools - was the motto: "Save the child. Kill the savage." Great, isn't it? Kill the savage, and save the person. Think about that.

That was the policy, and we see it reflected in the conflicts experienced by so many adult Native Americans. When I look at my dad's life and the enormous challenges he faced - he just passed away recently - I remember that he once talked about a life that went from a sod house to watching a space shuttle being launched. In one generation! And the education that he finally talked about, only in the last two or three years of his life, was a racially segregated school system. He went to Nome, where there was a Native school and a white school; and how embarrassing it was to know that the Native school was considered the lower one. What a sense of shame at this and at all the punishments! We all know the punishments that people faced for speaking their Native languages in school.

Why is that such a bitter and terrible thing? Because it represented a rejection not of language, but of people - of us as people. Some now say "Well, get over it; we haven't been doing that for the last 20 years." But what they overlook is that it was a policy that's never, to my knowledge, been repudiated, apologized for, or condemned by the very system of education that did just that for over 80 years. We have elders who experienced it, and they've never received an apology for this. If we want to forgive, and forget, and move on, doesn't the first part of that require that somebody say "I was wrong."? First you get the admission of wrongdoing, and then you forget. We're still waiting, I think, for this society, at some level, to admit that it was wrong. Part of moving forward is to admit when we make mistakes, and I think that's part of the equation of progress.

When I look at what we're doing now in Alaska Native education, my concern is that we're going to be focusing on these exit exams; and we have entire high schools of Alaska Native students in which not one will succeed on the current exit exams, which are marked at the eighth grade level. Not one student! Now, from any one of those high schools, we're going to get a valedictorian who will have the opportunity to attend any University of Alaska campus on a tuition waiver; and what we're getting there is many Alaska Native students who have gotten A's and B's throughout their high school experiences. Sometimes, they have very respectable GPA's; and they come to the University with confidence that they're ready to take college classes. And guess what classes they have to take? They have to take 060, 080. These are not college courses. Essentially, they are having to spend their college tuitions in order to obtain a high school education. What does that do for you, when you're on campus and your friends are saying "I'm taking Biology 101, and I'm signed up for a chemistry class. I'm really having trouble in English 101, and History 113 is kind of tough; but I like it."? And then they ask you "What are you taking?" And what are you going to say? "I'm taking a whole load of high school equivalency classes this semester."? I see them on campus, and it's a terrible thing to be a part of. But that's the current reality for a significant population of our Alaska Native students. So what are we going to do?

The first part of it is to admit the fact that the current system is not designed to solve the problems of Alaska Native education. I've been a part of that system; I am a part of it, and I share the responsibility and the guilt for it. The primary missions of the University of Alaska are, in fact, to provide parking for faculty and winning teams for alumni, to pursue research and funding for employees, and to develop new and greater buildings. Now, that's not what we say; but that's the

way the power, the lobbying and the money go. What's not on the official mission statement of the University of Alaska - in fact, it was recently dropped - is any mention of Alaska Natives and their educational needs. Now, I think there are some wonderful programs within our state university system from which Alaska Natives can truly benefit. But they tend to be on "soft" money - to be rather marginal. They tend to depend a great deal on constant pressure and contributions from Alaska Native organizations. It's not a central part of the University's mission to be concerned about the educational shortcomings within the Alaska Native community.

What about our schools and school districts? I want to be candid here. I was a teacher. I taught social studies and English to students in middle school and high school; I went through more superintendents and principals than I want to remember - the rotation. About every three years, we'd get a whole new group of what I called "gerbils." They would come in, eager to fill their resumes, to make it all look good, to ensure that the basketball teams were winning - because about the only thing that many rural Alaskan schools have figured out how to teach is basketball. And they haven't figured out a whole lot more, if we are to believe these test scores and exit exams.

I saw school boards whose members were being sent to workshops, and they were overwhelmed. They were being trained to think that a school board member spends 95% of the time agreeing to things that no one can understand, voting to approve documents that people couldn't read to save their lives, and having administrators tell them "Well, if you don't vote to approve this, we won't get the funding for such and such." And so, the board members, trying to do the right thing (because you've got to have money for your kids and for their schools), end up voting for policies that nobody's following. And what I kept thinking, when the REAA's started in 1976, was that we Alaska Natives had finally gotten our hands on the wheel - and that we were soon going to move to a point where Native school board members were going to say "Wait a minute, we did not take over rural Alaska schools in order to run them as though they're in Texas - or with a made-for-California curriculum. We are not getting what we need and expect, and that has to change." But so far, that hasn't happened.

Do you want some social statistics about Alaska Native education? We have slightly more Alaska Native males in prison than we do in college. That's an educational statistic. And, by the way, the State of Alaska spends five times more for incarcerating Alaska Native males than in educating them. Is that satisfying? Is this where we wanted to be almost 30 years ago, when the REAAs were starting up? Do we just keep putting the system in cruise control: business as usual, attending meetings, going to the annual conferences, getting per diems, drawing salaries, building resumes? We get so caught up in making the machinery work, in making sure that the train runs on time, in just getting through the school year, that we're losing track of the most essential issues of all.

We have the highest incidence of youth substance abuse of any population in the state. In dramatic ways, FAS and FAE are the central tragedy we're facing within our community; and people are still in the process of trying to identify the extent of it. How do you educate these children who have such profound challenges? The answer is that, largely, we don't know. We don't know at the university level, and we sure don't know at the school level. At best, we're just minimizing a lifetime of damage. Now, what does that have to do with schools? Don't these numbers mean that there's an enormous educational hole that's not being filled in the lives of Alaska Native kids? How could there not be? Well, if you can come up with a way to fill that void during this workshop, we get something even more important. We will see the next generation of Alaska Native students doing dramatically better, as a whole, than we've ever done before.

But, let me offer some suggestions. What it comes down to is that our schools are just pushing skill-and-drill in order to pass the exam - trying to put out a fire, one cup of water at a time. They're missing the main point: that, for a lot of kids, learning the skill isn't actually the hard part. Figuring out why in the hell you would want to bother is the real issue. That's the way the kids talk; and I apologize, but I hear them say it. "Why should I bother? What's the point?" We haven't provided them with a point in our educational system. The point was removed by 80 years of

education that said "You have to give up being Native in order to become educated." Our kids still have that false impression. And it's not just the kids who believe it. There are adults in our community who say the same thing, passing on that same terrible message.

We have to turn that around. Specifically, how do we do this? We give our Native students the reason why they want to do this when we build themselves - their real lives - into the curriculum, into what they learn. They can learn about our history, our circumstances, our promises, our traditions, our challenges, our communities, our history. They can learn that from us, in schools that we own. On UAA campuses, we get kids from this very region who don't know what AVCP is. They are bright kids, and they think an IRA is an individual retirement account, or the Irish Republican something or other. They don't know what ANCSA is; and they think that Molly Hootch is a kind of liquor, even though they came up through the so-called Molly Hootch high schools. We have students who don't know what was amended regarding 1991. They couldn't tell you the full title of ANILCA and have no idea that its Title VIII feeds them. What they don't know is our histories, our issues, our lives; and, without knowing that, what's the point of pursuing all these academic skills? The answer that we've always offered is: "Well, if you learn these skills you'll earn money." That's the promise. But Native students also know that money just isn't that important to Native villages. It's not the big thing. They know in their hearts that the important thing is about community. They just don't know how to participate in that community. They don't know what role they should take, and our schools aren't helping them figure it out - because that's not in the made-for-California curriculum.

In the almost thirty years since the REAA's started in 1976, we haven't produced a generation of Alaska Native superintendents - and it's a shame on us, it's a failure on our part, and it's unacceptable. If, by the year 2006, we don't have a majority of rural Alaska Native school districts finally being run by Alaska Natives, what is the point? Shouldn't the majority of teachers in rural Alaska, 30 years after the REAA's (with their promise of local control), came into existence, be well-qualified Alaska Natives? How do we get there? Let's not count on having other people figure that out. We have to do it. We have to be the ones who insist that the status quo changes fundamentally.

Let me just give us a point of encouragement here. If we were looking at Alaska in 1960, rather than 2002, who would have predicted that the largest state-chartered corporation in Alaska would be owned and operated by Natives? Who would have thought that? Who in 1960 would have predicted that Alaska Natives would own billions of dollars in assets and hold hundreds of jobs in these corporations? The downside is that our institutions also employ thousands of non-Natives - because our education system hasn't kept up with preparing qualified Alaska Natives for these jobs.

An earlier generation of Alaska Natives made an enormous transformation. If the people of Arizona woke one day to find that their largest state-chartered corporation belonged to an Indian tribe, it would be front page news. They would want to know what happened. Here, in Alaska, it has happened, and we don't even think about it. We have dramatically changed the economic and political landscape by that earlier generation's pursuit of our land claims. Admittedly, the entire picture is uneven. I recognize that our achievements are a half-full cup, but we did transform our world.

We also transformed Native health care. When my dad started with Norton Sound Health Corporation, the prediction was that when Natives took over health care, the result would be an enormous disaster - that it couldn't happen because Alaska Natives were incapable of running our own health care system. But we analyzed the record of the federal government in running the system and decided that we just had to be better than that. And now, most of the health care delivery for Alaska Natives in this state is owned and controlled by Natives. The sad fact is that we haven't set up the educational structure so that the jobs in our health care system are filled by Alaska Natives. We haven't taken on the educational structures and insisted on a dramatic takeover, as we did to the health structures. That's our failure, and that's why we're here today.

We're no longer going to accept this marginalized role, this lack of influence on the education of our own children. The reason why we must do this is that Alaska Native education is not working. We've given the current system 30 years in which to perform effectively; and for the majority of Alaska Native students, it hasn't. Our responsibility in this setting is to make sure that the failure doesn't continue for another 30 years. It's got to be different.

Whatever you do, don't listen to people who say: "It's got to go on this way because of...[such and such]." The real question is: "How are we going to change it?" What part do you want to play in such a process? What we must shoot for is that Alaska Natives over-represent our population as college graduates. I want more of them to be more successful. I want our students, when they go for further training, to do extremely well. I want the majority of jobs within the Native corporations to belong to Natives. Isn't that overdue? I want the majority of jobs in rural Alaska, especially the high-paid professional jobs that continue to be occupied by too many imports, to be filled with Alaska Natives. Most importantly, we need a generation of Alaska Natives that has been educated for the future and is committed to meeting the challenges faced by our own communities - here at home. That, in turn, will allow our Native communities to be assured that our cultures and traditions remain firmly in place as we confront the future.

And how do we do that? Well, that's why we're all here today, and I'm excited at the prospect of being a part of changing the circumstances. I appreciate the time that you've allowed me to take this morning.

Thank you very much.

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